



## **Problems of community (in)capacity in a low-cost housing community in Cape Town, South Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Literature and evidence principally from the Global South have, in recent years, highlighted the role of 'grass-roots' or 'community-led' groups in self-organising to champion the rights of the poor, with remarkable achievements. In particular, the ability of grass-roots movements not only to secure specific objectives (e.g. service provision), but also to strengthen individual and collective capacity has been highlighted. Although proponents of participation are aware of the dangers of an over-reliance on grassroots-led development, as well as the inability of community-based activism to address poverty at all scales, less attention is given to what happens when a poor community is provided with services in the context of weak collective capacity and in the absence of grass-roots organisation.

The case study for this research is a former informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, the residents of which received state housing on adjacent land in 1999. Beneficiaries of this contemporary low-cost housing are a diverse 'community' and were awarded housing without a 'struggle' and thus without the collective drive, capacity or leadership necessary to be full participants in the ensuing development process. Based on research undertaken in this neighbourhood over a long-term trajectory, the paper provides an assessment of the community's struggle to assert itself in a collective sense, analysed in three time-based dimensions: firstly, pre-development community diversity; secondly, exclusion from the development process as a consequence of absent community mobilisation, externally-controlled processes, community division, and asymmetrical power and information; thirdly, post-development community consolidation, hampered by continued division and weak capacity, ultimately delaying the community's socio-economic advancement. Essentially, the implications of becoming beneficiaries without community agreement, involvement, organisation or capacity are considered.

## PAPER

The participation of beneficiaries in their own development is widely considered a crucial component of any development project. Previous failures of both state and market interventions to address local-level poverty are largely attributed to the exclusion of poor people from projects and planning (Baumann et al, 2004; Chambers, 1997a, 1997b), leading to inaccurate perceptions of beneficiaries as passive victims rather than active agents, as well as 'outsider' opinions of their needs. Participatory approaches are thus favoured in the hope that giving poor people control over their development will decrease poverty.<sup>1</sup> In addition, if one embraces Sen's (1990) approach to development, in which people are of intrinsic worth (rather than just serving an instrumental role), participation is vital in increasing human autonomy, empowerment and local capacity. Furthermore, contemporary understandings of poverty as 'multidimensional' increasingly recognise voiceless and marginalisation as components of poverty (World Bank, 2000), and thus participation in itself is an anti-poverty mechanism. However, the depth of beneficiary involvement varies significantly, ranging from information-sharing and consultation at one end of the spectrum, to full control of the development process from start to finish at the other, with involvement in implementation and decision-making occupying the medium.

The factors determining the positioning of a development project on this participation gradient are typically attributed to the extent of power transfer between beneficiaries and agencies. Although the egalitarian aim of "decentred power" in which no stakeholder holds monopoly (Nelson and Wright, 1997) is clearly unrealistic, this tenuous balance of power is the foundation of participation. Some level of agency involvement is necessary, but whilst over-agency power can stifle beneficiary empowerment, over-beneficiary power can suffer from inadequate knowledge. Based on beneficiary involvement in a low-cost housing project in Cape Town, this research highlights the role played by the project starting point in determining beneficiary involvement, i.e. whether initially conceptualised and driven by the community or by public/private officials and interests. In particular, the importance of community capacity and organisation in determining the depth of project participation, and ultimately the sustainability of the community, are considered.

Provision of housing for the poor has been a major focus in post-apartheid South Africa. The 'National Housing Subsidy Scheme', established in 1994 provides eligible households with a one-off housing subsidy that effectively gives ownership of a newly-built house, colloquially known as RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) housing. In 1994 the government pledged to build 1 million houses in the next five years, and by September 2005 1.9 million RDP houses had been built (RSA, 2007:376), yet despite this impressive record 15 million people continue to 'squat' in informal shacks throughout South Africa's cities (Baumann et al, 2004:195), indicating the scale of the problem. In addition to the post-apartheid focus on material deliverables such as housing as crucial to poverty reduction, the new era of full democracy ensures that community participation in this process is considered equally crucial (Baumann et al, 2004; Bénit, 2002). However, whether involvement is dynamic and two-way is debatable, linked to the extent of organisational capacity in the pre-development 'community'.

The case study for this research is a former informal settlement in Cape Town, South Africa, the residents of which received state housing on adjacent land in 1999, named Westlake village and comprising 650 properties. This 'community' is in fact a diverse collection of residents with

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<sup>1</sup> A secondary agenda for beneficiary participation is the maximisation of agency efficiency, but this is not the focus of this research.

different pre-development levels of service, as well as racial, socio-economic and political identities, united only by their pre-development residence on the same land area. Thus their potential for united community organisation is problematic. Furthermore, this cluster of diverse individuals did not unite in mobilisation against the state to secure services, but were awarded housing without a 'struggle' and thus with minimal collective drive, capacity or leadership. The combination of this internal diversity and absent fight was weak community capacity that enabled external agencies to exclude beneficiaries from any meaningful participation in the housing development, with long-term consequences for the sustainability of the neighbourhood.

This research is based on a three-year trajectory of research in Westlake village, complemented by two specific periods of in-depth fieldwork (January-June 2004 and September-December 2006) involving semi-structured interviews with residents, activists and interested parties. The case is rooted in both the global and South African literature on collective capacity and grass-roots organisation before discussion turns to the case itself, addressing the problems of collective incapacity in the community. The paper provides an assessment of the community's struggle to assert itself in a collective sense, analysed in three time-based dimensions: firstly, pre-development community diversity; secondly, exclusion from the development process as a consequence of absent community mobilisation, externally-controlled processes, community division and asymmetrical power and information; thirdly, post-development community consolidation, hampered by continued division and weak capacity, delaying the community's socio-economic advancement. Essentially, the implications of becoming beneficiaries without community agreement, involvement, organisation or capacity are considered.

## **COLLECTIVE CAPACITY IN COMMUNITIES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

Literature and evidence principally from the Global South have, in recent years, highlighted the role of 'grass-roots' or 'community-led' groups in self-organising to champion the rights of the poor, with remarkable achievements (e.g. Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2004). In particular, the ability of grass-roots movements not only to secure specific objectives (e.g. service provision), but also to strengthen individual and collective capacity has been highlighted.

Increased social and political global connectivity has provided new opportunities for the poor and marginalised to organise and resist state and market demands in new collective forms. Greater access to communications technology has enabled poor communities to organise with increasing sophistication, exchanging knowledge, experience and resources previously unattainable to those without political or socio-economic status. These 'new social movements' have successfully contested their right to political voice, often with both material (e.g. services) and developmental (e.g. community capacity) outcomes.

The active involvement of beneficiaries in their own development is perceived important for two key reasons: firstly, to ensure the success of the development; and secondly because voicelessness and powerlessness are increasingly recognised as components of poverty and thus community involvement that strengthens local capacity is in itself contributing to poverty reduction. Indeed, Baumann et al (2004) argue the need for poverty reduction programmes to move away from a pure focus on physical delivery (e.g. houses) to instead prioritise the process involved, for example strengthening local organisational capacity so that poor people can solve their own problems and engage with external actors, as the key to poverty reduction. In other words, the ways in which development projects (e.g. housing) are delivered and negotiated are as crucial to poverty reduction as the projects themselves.

Although proponents of participation are aware of the dangers of an over-reliance on grassroots-led development (e.g. problems of inadequate local knowledge, 'capture' by local elites), as well as the inability of community-based activism to address poverty at all scales, less attention is given to what happens when a poor community is provided with services in the context of weak collective capacity and in the absence of grass-roots organisation.

South Africa has a long history of community activism, for example the role played by groups at all scales in the 'struggle' against apartheid. Indeed, the ruling ANC political party originated as an anti-apartheid social movement, and the peak of domestic anti-apartheid action in the 1980s was led by township organisations. These ANC-sponsored community-based groups, known as 'civics', organised various actions against the apartheid state in this period, notably consumer and rent boycotts, stayaways and marches (Beall et al, 2002:71; Bähre, 2007). They continue to dominate community (rather than local or regional) politics throughout South Africa's townships, organised nationally by SANCO (South African National Civic Organisation), functioning as a medium between official council representatives and the community. In fact, post-apartheid development policy insists on the involvement of civics (or Community Development Forums as they are often now labelled) in RDP projects, reflecting the contemporary focus on local participation and community capacity-building (Seekings, 1992). Grass-roots activism and the ability of social groups to challenge and subvert political processes are a crucial part of South Africa's history and contemporary challenge, and function at all levels of society, from 'civics' or CDFs and street committees in townships, to 'ratepayer associations' in wealthy suburbs. Although these community organisations have diverse agendas they are all primarily focused on "material needs" rather than "policy-based critiques" and are thus grounded in the 'everyday' (Dykes 2004a:163). However, the organisation of these groups and their capacity to negotiate their position against experts and elites is highly place-specific (Oldfield, 2000)

## **PRE-DEVELOPMENT: COMMUNITY DIVERSITY**

In the late-1980s/early-1990s, as apartheid's stringent spatial regulations were decaying alongside severe overcrowding as a consequence of insufficient housing for blacks in urban areas, land invasions in Cape Town's prime areas, often in close proximity to the employment opportunities prevalent in White group areas, emerged and were tolerated due to the tenuous political climate (Saff, 1998).<sup>2</sup> At that same time, a group of seasonally employed caddies from Westlake golf estate began to 'squat' informally on an under-used and derelict tract of nearby land that, despite bordering the M3 highway and Pollsmoor prison, was in fact in a prime location in the leafy Constantia valley famous for its wine estates and large suburban houses.

By the late-1990s this had grown into a large informal settlement (colloquially known as 'Die Bos' or 'the bush') housing 1,096 people in 327 shacks varying in size and quality, the majority of whom (80%) were Black African alongside a sizeable minority (20%) of Coloured 'squatters' (City of Cape Town Housing Department, 1997). Elsewhere on this government-owned tract of land were several clusters of decaying public housing (colloquially known as the 'married quarters' or 'warden houses'), historically providing accommodation for local nurses and prison wardens but by the late-1990s over-crowded with a mix of legitimate and illegitimate 'tenants'. These formal and serviced (albeit dilapidated) units housed 821 people, predominantly a

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<sup>2</sup> The apartheid labels of African (updated to Black African), Coloured, Indian/Asian and European (updated to White) are used as they continue to reflect contemporary discourses in South Africa. In addition, black (lower case) is used in reference to non-whites.

Coloured community (88%) alongside a handful of Black African (5%) and foreign immigrants (7%) (City of Cape Town Housing Department, 1997).<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: The informal settlement (Die Bos) prior to the development (Rabcav 2003)

In the mid-1990s when a tender to re-develop this 95 hectare area<sup>4</sup> was won by two local developers (Rabie and Cavcor), these diverse residents were considered a single 'community' that would be provided with new government-subsided houses as part of the development. In fact, this 'community' had anything but similar experiences. Black African residents of 'the bush' had overwhelmingly moved to Cape Town from distant and poor rural areas such as the Eastern Cape (only a handful came from local Cape townships) and thus were coping with the novelty of city life, as well as the hardships of managing everyday life with minimal sanitation facilities, no electricity and irregular informal employment. While Coloured residents had a much longer history in Cape Town, having almost exclusively moved to Westlake from the Cape Flats,<sup>5</sup> and thus were not adapting to city life, for the minority squatting in Die Bos the lack of any basic facilities would have involved a major change in lifestyle. In contrast, the majority of pre-development Coloured residents lived in various formal properties and thus enjoyed significant space (most properties had three or more bedrooms) as well as running water, indoor sanitation and electricity. They therefore had very little in common with their neighbours in the informal settlement, who were cramped into an average of 4-5sqm of living space per person (Baumann et al, 2004), with several family members sleeping, eating and cooking in shared space that lacked adequate protection from the weather, and where survival consumed daily energies. In fact most formal residents wished to firmly extricate themselves from any association with the squatter camp, perceived as dirty, inferior and certainly not part of their 'community'.

In addition to these diverse housing, service and urban experience, pre-development residents were also divided by racial identity. A 1997 survey indicated that 49.5% of residents were Black African (predominantly isiXhosa ethnicity), 47.5% were Coloured and 3% Angolan immigrants. Although residents lived alongside one another with relative everyday ease (Lemanski, 2006a), differences in language and political affiliation, predominantly tied to racial identity, severely hindered the potential for cohesive or united organisation or agreement. Thus, the conceptualisation of Westlake's beneficiaries as a 'community' was highly ambiguous. This is not unique, Bénit's (2002) research on the informal settlement of Diepsloot in Johannesburg highlighted similar concerns at the somewhat diverse alliance of residents; living in different

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<sup>3</sup> These figures are based on the surnames of those listed as living in Westlake by the 1997 housing survey and is therefore open to some error (City of Cape Town Housing Department, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> The land also accommodated two hospitals and a refuge for homeless people, which were relocated elsewhere to make way for the development.

<sup>5</sup> Most came from Cape Town's 'Coloured' areas, such as Grassy Park, Retreat, and Heathfield. These are all formal housing areas with full access to water, electricity and sanitation, but suffering from immense overcrowding with many people living in informal units, often a 'shack' in the backyard of a family member's house.

spatial zones, with diverse access to services and conflicting political allegiances; labelled as a single 'community' for the purposes of housing provision. In that case, the public authorities' lack of understanding regarding the socio-political context of the informal settlement and its diverse residents ultimately fragmented the 'community' based on divergent agendas, many of which were dormant prior to the development process. Thus, public (or in this case, private) intervention can ultimately inhibit any 'community spirit' and intensify divisions, even if the intervention has seemingly altruistic goals such as housing provision (Baumann et al, 2004, Bénit, 2002).

In the late-1990s the Westlake area was considered a major public health risk (CMC, 1997), in addition to being an eye-sore given its prime location, and thus the eagerness of provincial government to promote its private development is understandable. A condition of the proposed development was the re-location of the 700 families currently living on the land to new social houses, situated within the development. Although constructed by private developers, these houses were part-financed by the government housing subsidy<sup>6</sup> and part-financed by cross-subsidisation from the development as a whole (which ultimately comprised upmarket housing, a business/industrial park, offices, a private school, the US Consulate and retail space).<sup>7</sup> Residents of the informal settlement and the various publicly-owned houses were registered by an on-site survey undertaken by the municipal housing department in October 1997 and awarded certificates as registration of receipt of housing in the new development. In late-1999 residents moved into their new one-bedroom semi-detached houses, 27m sq. in size<sup>8</sup> with electricity, running water, tiled roofs and cavity walls, some 500m from their previous abode and were awarded full title deeds in exchange for demolishing their shack.



Figure 2: Westlake village after the development (taken by author, March 2004)

### ***Exclusion from the development process***

The development 'process' that occurred between residents being registered in 1997 and moving into houses in 1999 was dominated by the developers and local interest groups rather

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<sup>6</sup> Residents had to register for the state housing subsidy and the developers received R17 250 per unit (approximately 1232 GBP) from the government. The handful of residents ineligible for the subsidy had to pay this amount to the developers themselves to ensure ownership of a house in the new development.

<sup>7</sup> See Lemanski 2006b for a discussion of the development as a whole.

<sup>8</sup> To appease residents previously living in the larger formal properties (who did not want to relocate), they were given the option of receiving a 3-bedroom 54m sq house for an additional payment of R5000 (approx 350 GBP), whereas those from the informal settlement would have to pay R25 000 for this extension.

than the beneficiaries themselves. The unexpected nature of residents being informed that they would receive housing coupled with their lack of collective organisation and pre-existing divisions enabled more dominant socio-political groups to dictate the development agenda, supposedly acting as benevolent experts making decisions for the 'good' of poor and uneducated beneficiaries. However, without the 'real' involvement of beneficiaries in the development process, the subsequent development faced numerous problems, still being resolved eight years after houses were built. As beneficiaries had not organised around a common goal to fight for service delivery, a lack of community capacity, organisation and awareness enabled easy control by outsiders. The impact of this collective incapacity and community division on both the development process and the subsequent development of a new formal community, are thus explored.

### ***Absence of community mobilisation***

Unlike other informal settlements, in which residents developed community strength and capacity by fighting against the state for both the right to remain, receive services and ultimately formalisation, Westlake residents were 'given' such housing without a struggle through which to build community capacity. For example, in Oldfield's Delft South study (2000, 2004), 'Door Kickers' successfully organised themselves across racial, geographical, language and political divides to ensure housing, despite lacking resources or external support, leading to strong bonds between residents involved in the struggle. In addition, residents of the Green Point informal settlement developed significant "internal organisation and unity" as a consequence of five years of opposing the state in their fight to secure formalisation (Oldfield, 2000:859), and land invaders in Valhalla Park successfully fought the state for their right to remain and receive services, including a landmark court case, building sufficient community capacity to resolve internal problems such as crime and delinquency (Oldfield and Stokke, 2006). In contrast, those living on the Westlake land were simply awarded housing with no initial action on their part. The implications of receiving services without adequate community capacity have been widespread. Whilst Oldfield's widespread research on low-income communities leads her to emphasise the crucial role played by community mobilisation and capacity, the case study in this research had neither. Thus, Oldfield's analysis that "uneven and place-specific community-based capacity often directs the ways in which neighbourhoods and communities interpret, interface with and access state-run urban reconstruction programmes" (2000:859) is certainly true, not least where it is virtually non-existent.

### ***Externally-controlled process***

In the late-1990s, the developers established a 'Community Committee' to negotiate the specifics of the development. Membership of this committee comprised the developers, the various levels of government involved (central, provincial and municipal), technical experts (e.g. planners, engineers), local interest groups (e.g. surrounding institutions and residential homeowners) and potential beneficiaries (i.e. those currently 'squatting' on the land). However, the committee was numerically and vocally dominated by those with the knowledge and confidence to express their views. Meetings were led by the developers with input from government experts and surrounding residents, and although representatives of those who would be living in the new development were present, their involvement was marginal. For example, at a Community Committee meeting held in November 1997 to vote on three different plans for the final development, only six of the 41 people present were Westlake residents (Rabcav, 1997), and thus their voice (and vote) on the nature of their future habitat was severely limited. In the words of one of those present:

*We, as the representatives, were told by the developer to keep attendance to a minimum. We were told to bring only two people with [us]. We didn't know what would happen, we were new to this. The developer knows the rules not me. This draft development was put forward ... voting on the three scenarios started and we were outnumbered so there was no point putting our hands up ... On that day, 700 families were not able to decide their fate [A.V. 17/03/04]<sup>9</sup>*

Although this interviewee paints a picture of beneficiary exclusion, in fact, two main community groups from Westlake were represented in the development process, and the developers had gone to significant lengths to ensure the involvement of these groups. However, two crucial problems were ignored and exploited; firstly, these groups did not in fact represent the 'community', which was not sufficiently organised or cohesive to have agreed representation; and secondly, these groups held asymmetrical power and information to those controlling the process, indeed community groups were not involved in initial meetings and were only invited once the development had already been approved.

### ***Diversity becomes division***

Communities will always have diversity, but the advent of the development appears to have deepened these differences into division, rather than united all residents in working towards their future as homeowners. Prior to the development process there were three functioning community groups, with divergent constituencies based on racial identity, political affiliation and housing location (i.e. Die Bos or formal structures). The arrival of the development process divided, rather than united, these groups based on their involvement in the process and their proposed agendas for the development (Dykes, 2004a). Masizakhe, representing the informal settlement was completely excluded from the development process, and although PoW (People of Westlake), representing the formal structures, participated in the Community Committee, it was CROW ('The Combined/Concerned Residents of Westlake'), a mixed-race group in favour of a united Westlake who were favoured by the developers as the voice of the community (Rab cav, 1997; Dykes, 2004b). Despite the presence of these community groups during the development process, the lack of community cohesiveness, linked to the absence of a common goal across all residents, based primarily on race, politics and housing location, restricted their involvement. A non-resident present at the Community Committee commented:

*At the meetings, they weren't speaking with one voice [Y.W.14/05/04]*

Conforming this, a researcher present at the time described the development meetings as a "contest" between "disparate and divided community based groups" (Dykes, 2004a). Indeed, the different groups represented different sections of residents and with such diverse vested interests and needs, a common agenda was absent. For example, the PoW group's agenda focused on enabling residents of the formal houses to retain their large home and not be forced into a new (smaller) social house.

*I was chairman of PoW [People of Westlake] and we only covered the formal settlement, so we approached the squatters and said we must work together, but they didn't want it because they think we're going to get big houses [A.V. 17/03/04]*

Furthermore, Masizakhe was set up purely to oppose CROW and thus did not have an explicit agenda, but its constituency was perceived as exclusively Black African informal settlement residents, whilst CROW was perceived as an ANC organisation primarily interested in Coloured

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<sup>9</sup> To ensure anonymity, responses from interviewees are initialled and dated.

residents of the formal structures, thus highlighting the role of race, politics and location in dividing community structures. Although these community divides and the weak capacity of organisations (a consequence of not having fought to achieve a common goal) were problematic, they could have been overcome, particularly with support from external groups involved in the development process. However, a researcher present during the development process argues that the developers intentionally exploited rivalries between community groups in order to divide the community and weaken opposition to the development (Dykes, 2004b). This lack of interest in the long-term development of the community is confirmed by the City of Cape Town Director of Social Development's belief that "the developer went for a quick and fast approach to development, so it wasn't sustainable" (Naidoo, 2004). However, one would hardly expect private developers to prioritise equal community involvement at the expense of their financial investment and thus the absence of assistance from public officials in the process to support the community (and its organisations) is significant.

Although the South African ANC government at a national level was promoting community involvement in its post-apartheid 'Reconstruction and Development Programmes', at a local level the Western Cape province was controlled by the National Party (the previous apartheid rulers) and thus the interests of high-income communities and private investments were prioritised. Once the land transfer from public to private ownership was approved in 1997, the state effectively withdrew from the process, leaving the community to negotiate their rights from a base of fifty years of marginalisation and exclusion.

The developers' exploitation of the community's divisions and incapacity is evident. Several CROW leaders were employed by the developers as 'community consultants' or 'representatives', for which they received financial payment as well as access to resources and opportunities. This not only enabled plunder but effectively pitted them against other community groups, preventing the development of a common agenda for all residents, while also giving them a vested interest in supporting proposals from the developers (their employers). In fact, the temptations of such proximity to the developers ultimately corrupted CROW,<sup>10</sup> leaving the community with no real 'voice' or representation on the Community Committee. Thus, despite the developers' literature asserting that "at a boisterous public meeting in December 1997, this Development Plan was adopted - to the ... obvious delight of the squatters" (Rabcau, 2003) in fact the 'squatters' present at that meeting were a cluster of individuals who did not represent the community and in fact were in the pay of the developers and thus not neutral.

Pre-development community diversity was thus transformed into division between different factions and groups, aggravated by the 'divide and rule' approach adopted by the developers. Thus, as a consequence of the community's lack of organisation and capacity, as well as their inability to bridge the diverse interests of the community, the developers were able to exploit divisions between the various groups in order to render Westlake's beneficiaries onlookers rather than active decision-makers in the development process. Indeed, evidence from this case strengthens Beall et al's (2002:130) concerns about whether a single community group can ever

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<sup>10</sup> For example, there are allegations that CROW leaders pocketed money intended to pay local residents for painting the new houses, that they 'sold' certificates to guarantee formal housing, and also that resources provided by charities to alleviate conditions in the informal settlement were stolen by these community 'representatives' (D.B. 30/03/04, T.T. 06/05/04). Although none of these allegations are provable, it is significant that none of these leaders ever resided in the new development. Evidence of project 'capture' by local elites is found elsewhere in the RDP housing system, often with much more violent and bloody forms of corruption (e.g. Bähre, 2007)

be expected to represent an entire 'community' especially one with a diversity of interests where the potential for corruption as the sole intermediaries between residents and developers is rife.

### ***Asymmetrical power and information***

The successful exclusion of Westlake's beneficiaries from their own development process was not solely a consequence of their absent mobilisation and significant division (exploited by the developers), but also linked to the asymmetrical power and information between poor, uneducated and historically marginalised residents and well-educated professionals with access to political and economic resources and information.

The historic socio-economic disadvantages and political marginalisation of blacks in South Africa, the population groups resident in Westlake village, ensured they were easily subverted and ignored in the development process by 'experts'. According to the 1997 survey, unemployment and poverty were rife in the informal settlement with almost a sixth of households (16.4%) surviving on no income whatsoever, while most (56%) struggled on a tiny monthly income of R401-1500 (City of Cape Town Housing Department, 1997).<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, residents were unable to overcome these structural economic inequalities to effectively challenge a development that was supported by private developers and public officials with significant political leverage and socio-economic status. The combination of these asymmetrical power relations with the diversity of the everyday needs and experiences of residents enabled easy exploitation of pre-existing community divisions to ensure minimal beneficiary involvement and opposition to the development.

In addition the lack of information conveyed to residents combined with the short time frame for discussion further hindered any effective community action. While officials had long known about the development plans, and even high-income residents from nearby areas had been made aware, those living on the Westlake land were unexpectedly (from their perspective) registered for housing in October 1997 and given minimal information or time to consider their future. The two months between residents being informed and the final development proposal being voted on at a Community Committee meeting would be insufficient for any diverse group to organise collectively, but especially so for one without the background of community mobilisation, agreement or capacity. Thus, the base from which community groups sought to negotiate the position of Westlake residents in the development process was flawed from the outset. Indeed, Baumann et al (2004:207) note, based on numerous housing interventions in South Africa, that "communities need time and space to explore all possible options", something certainly not available in the Westlake case. In fact, there are indications that this rapidity was an intentional ploy to ensure lack of opposition to the development (Dykes, 2004b). In any case, the development had already been approved prior to the involvement of beneficiaries, with only the specifics of the development discussed by the so-called Community Committee and thus those involved were merely being informed rather than involved in decision-making.

The land transfer was signed in August 1997 and thus the meeting held in September 1997 to garner the opinions of residents from adjacent high-income neighbourhoods<sup>12</sup> was a farce as the

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<sup>11</sup> R401 is approximately 28.50 GBP, and R1500 is approximately 107 GBP

<sup>12</sup> Although high-income neighbourhoods are typically opposed to public housing proposals (e.g. Bremner, 2000), in this case they were supportive, preferring the establishment of a social housing area to the present squatter settlement. However, it is still significant that the opinions of adjacent high-income residents were garnered before those of the beneficiaries, reflecting the priorities of both the developers and provincial government at that time.

deal had already been made without any public consultation (Dykes, 2004a). Furthermore, subsequent meetings to which the beneficiaries were invited were not only information-sharing dressed up to look like participation, but required poor and marginalised residents to interact with professional developers, with no public intermediary as the land had already been sold and the development was entirely private. The minimal involvement of beneficiaries is neatly summed by the leader of a residents association in a nearby suburb:

*I was invited to the initial meetings about the development. It wasn't an open meeting, you had to be invited ... I don't think the people from Westlake were involved ... I supposed if you were giving them houses and land they didn't have a right to a say about what was happening in the area. I think they should have been happy [E.R.17/05/04]*

This quote indicates a conceptualisation, shared by the developers, that beneficiaries had no right to be involved in the development process because they would be receiving houses and services 'for free'. Indeed, beneficiaries were considered passive bystanders rather than legitimate and active stakeholders, easily ignored because of their lack of socio-economic and political power as well as weak access to information. This disregard for the needs and wants of the beneficiary community is not restricted to Westlake village and is identified elsewhere, attributed as a consequence of South Africa's rigid project-based housing policy, which favours public officials (e.g. local councillors) rather than community organisations, which are in any case undermined by the absence of alternatives to the proposed development (Huchzermeyer, 2002). Thus, the role of community-based organisations in the provision of housing to their constituents is limited to consultation rather than active participation, favouring 'professionals' as the key decision-makers and thus restricting access to relevant power and information, further alienating decisions from the community (Baumann et al, 2004; Huchzermeyer, 2002). In essence, the RDP housing process seeks to "simplify ... and order ... complex social and political realities" (Bähre, 2007) and thus is likely to stumble. For example, while the emphasis on community participation in RDP programmes is necessary, the simplistic interpretation of this as a single unified body that demonstrates the 'voice' of the community is naïve at best. Indeed, in response to protests from those in Westlake's formal properties against the development, the municipal housing director at the time said "we cannot have 35 families or so holding 700 to ransom ... it's the best bargain going" (*Sunday Times*, 1998, 1999). This indicates the inflexibility of the housing system, unable to consider the very legitimate opinions and perspectives of a small group of beneficiaries who wished to remain in their present formal structures,<sup>13</sup> as well as an obvious ability for development leaders to ride roughshod over beneficiaries because of information and power asymmetries. This once again highlights the problems that arose as a consequence of weak community organisation, capacity and involvement in their future.

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<sup>13</sup> Although this group (PoW) were not successful in fully opposing the development and remaining in their larger formal properties, two concessions were agreed. Firstly, residents from the formal properties were given the option of a larger RDP house in return for an addition R5000 (for which a loan could be secured) and secondly, 26 original properties were retained intact and their residents given the option to purchase or rent them (Dykes, 2004b). However, the former concession was easy for the developers given the minimal costs of extending a house they were building anyway (but had ramifications on dividing the post-development community), and the second concession was only for those properties situated in the area already zoned for social housing and thus did not change the developers' plans. Thus, while the developers were able to give the impression of responding to residents' demands, they were in fact reducing their work load because they would no longer need to build new houses for the 26 families retaining their old property.

Thus, a lack of community involvement in the process was partly a consequence of weak community capacity and divided organisation at the time the development was announced, largely because the community had not united and mobilised around a common goal. In addition, this was augmented by the limited role given to the community in the development process, functioning as 'approvers' rather than decision-makers. Furthermore, the developers' divide and rule strategy exploited the community's lack of organisational capacity by favouring one (non-representative) group at the expense of the rest of the community as well as relying on the information and power asymmetry between the developers and beneficiaries.

## **POST-DEVELOPMENT: COMMUNITY CONSOLIDATION**

Westlake village's weak community capacity and organisation vis-à-vis the developers did not just determine their role in the development process, but has continued to affect the community's post-development progress. The social housing experience of Westlake village has been hampered by division and friction amongst various community groups, each claiming to be its true representative. Although the community organisations are new, divisions are rooted in Westlake's turbulent history, in particular those that dominated the development process.

### ***Continued division and weak capacity***

Two major differences continue to divide organisational structures in Westlake village: previous location (i.e. whether resident in the informal settlement or formal structures prior to the development) and racial identity (i.e. Black African, Coloured or foreign immigrant) and the cultural, political and socio-economic attributes coupled with it. The dominance of pre-development location identities in the new community highlights the failure of the development process to unite the community.

As people moved into their new houses in 1999, the various remaining representatives combined into one body, WESUCO (Westlake United Civic Organisation) (D.B. 30/03/04), which became the sole voice representing Westlake village and sought to bridge community differences with a mix of race, gender and previous location on its executive. However, as its constituents had all recently received services (e.g. homeownership, electricity, running water) there was limited support for community involvement and activism, and in any case WESUCO did not have a common goal or vision around which to motivate people.

At the same time, a group of ANC supporters who had not received housing in the new development (for various reasons such as post-1997 arrival, residing/working at adjacent institutions) established the Westlake village branch of SANCO, declaring their necessity because "the people have no representation" (BT 28/01/04). Although SANCO were united in their target to secure housing, this goal obviously did not represent the broader community as most residents were already homeowners. Furthermore, their explicit ANC links and isiXhosa identity excluded at least half of the village. However, despite this lack of constituent representativity, SANCO were sufficiently vocal and well-organised to usurp WESUCO as Westlake's primary voice. Their desire to be Westlake's sole leaders led to significant division within the community, and a period of stagnation as the community was unable to move forward, with all suggestions for development vehemently opposed by SANCO.

*WESUCO and SANCO are not working together ... There's no voice for the community now (D.B. 30/03/04).*

In recognition of this severe division and its impact on “stifling the community”, in 2002 the City of Cape Town’s social development department began working in Westlake village, seeking to establish a united community forum (Naidoo, 2004). Municipal social development workers organised monthly debates/discussions and workshops with all interested parties to in order thrash out the logistics of forming a unified coordinating body in the community. However, the various community groups and organisations continued to demonstrate significant division and competition, each representing different factions and interests within the small community yet each seeking to be Westlake’s sole representative. Indeed, the social development department were amazed at the difficulty of establishing a unified body compared to their successes elsewhere, with the director of social development explaining:

*Westlake is very different to other communities, they have no civil groups ... but in all other areas they have a strong civil voice (Naidoo, 2004)*

Attempts to establish a community forum were repeatedly thwarted, particularly by SANCO, who perceived themselves the leaders of Westlake village and thus felt threatened by the process. Finally, after three years of wrangling (including a lengthy stalemate period), the Westlake Development Forum was launched in December 2004, with representatives from the main community organisations on its board of seven, in addition to a mix of location histories and racial identities. However, two years later there were rumours that the forum was divided and no longer meeting regularly and that despite having a strong and effective leader, his position was undermined by his location history. A residential employee of an adjacent institution, he has never resided in Westlake village (pre- or post-development) and thus is not considered a true villager by some, and indeed as a non-homeowner, has diverse interests from the bulk of the community.

Clearly, divisions based on location history and racial identity, not bridged in the past by a united goal, continue to dominate the community’s development. Of course, it is impossible to know what Westlake village would be like if the community had been involved in fighting for its creation. Would the diverse groups have united around a common goal to secure service delivery? Would the community have developed organisational strength and capacity to manage themselves? Although unknown, it is clear that firstly, the absence of community organisation, vision and capacity has hindered the village, and secondly, that diverse communities elsewhere have effectively united under a shared need and successfully built capacity through their struggle to meet that need (e.g. Oldfield, 2004).

### ***Delayed community progress***

The consequences of weak community capacity and organisation have not been limited to the construction and early stages of the development, but have continued to hamper Westlake village’s progress. For example, a very obvious consequence of the community’s effective exclusion from the development process has been a lack of understanding and consequent disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the development.

*When we were shown the development pictures ... it looked nothing like this. We were meant to have lawns and pavements and clean roads. (V.X. 01/02/04).*

*In the beginning, when people began moving into the community, they told us we would get big houses but it’s not true. (I.C. 12/02/04)*

*We have me and my husband and 8 children in this house – the government must extend my house [N.M.M. 22/09/06]*

The lack of education regarding the specifics of the development and the complexities of becoming a homeowner clearly point to a lack of participation in the development process. The developers focused exclusively on provision of a material product as a solution to poverty with scant reference to the process of participation and community empowerment as equally important in addressing poverty. Ironically, because of their lack of discussion and involvement in the project, beneficiaries are dissatisfied with the product itself.

Furthermore, without a unified voice having ever mobilised residents into action, the community was for a long time reliant on external support, for example the social development department and local NGOs. Although outside involvement from the municipality has facilitated the establishment of a unified forum, external reliance has for a long time inhibited internal community capacity and exacerbated divisions between existing internal civic groups. Indeed, research elsewhere suggesting that communities with strong internal capacity but weak external support (Oldfield, 2000:865), or weak internal capacity (Bénil, 2002:61) can successfully unite to champion their cause reveals the double-fault in Westlake. Firstly, that as outside support is stronger than internal capacity, reliance on the external serves only to hinder any internal development; and secondly, the absence of internal community capacity and divided civic organisation are traced to the absence of any community-drive to secure housing.

However, despite concerns regarding the unity and leadership of the development forum, it is now functioning as the sole voice and representative for the community. For example, in 2005 when a local developer tried to convince all homeowners in Westlake village to sell their properties in exchange for cash and a plot elsewhere, the development forum successfully mediated a community meeting between the developer and the community, ultimately informing him that the community rejected such a proposal. Whereas in the past such a proposition might have divided the community, with scope for exploitation by some, community leadership structures are now (six years after arrival) sufficiently stable to represent, defend and advocate the community, at the same time building collective capacity. In addition, other community organisations are now appearing, seeking to work in tandem with one another (rather than in competition as in the past). For example, in response to high levels of crime in the village, in particular property theft, in 2006 a neighbourhood watch scheme was established. Residents are thus, for the first time, working together for a common goal; patrolling the streets to protect their families and property.

As the community has gradually developed collective leadership structures, albeit with reliance on external support, they are learning to resolve problems and negotiate with outsiders. This not only highlights the importance of grass-roots groups, but also the difficulty of developing collective capacity post-service delivery. The success of these new community groups in representing and advocating for the community will be played out over the coming years.

## **CONCLUSION**

As identified earlier, beneficiary participation that ultimately strengthens community capacity is in itself recognised as a poverty reduction mechanism. Community-based capacity needs to be developed to ensure communities are able to collectively identify problems and consider solutions (Baumann et al, 2004:207). Thus, the incapacity of community organisations in this case not only hindered the success of the development from the perspective of its beneficiaries, but also hampered its potential for addressing poverty.

The community incapacity identified in this case is a consequence of three main factors: internal diversity and organisational inexperience, external control and exploitation, and structural

constraints. Some of the specifics are particular to this case, or at least to the South African context, but many are not and have implications for community-based development throughout the Global South.

### ***Internal diversity and organisational inexperience***

The development of community organisations that represent and are accountable to their constituents is crucial to both the development process and the long-term sustainability of the community (Baumann et al, 2004:207). Most communities are diverse, but this diversity does not automatically ensure division. Evidence that diverse communities can unite to achieve a collective goal (Oldfield, 2000, 2002, 2004) indicates the necessity of a common agenda (however broad) for all members of a group, in addition to a period of mobilisation (alongside representative and accountable community groups), both absent in this case. In most cases, it seems that a plurality of community organisations could better represent all beneficiaries of a development programme. Indeed, the failures of consultative processes such as the CDF in representing all members of a community are significant (Beall et al, 2002:174). Problems of capture by local elites, participation fatigue (amongst both residents and experts), inability to represent internal diversity and division easily renders one group either powerless and ineffective or all-powerful and non-representative. A plurality of organisations may therefore better represent the diversity of communities. Although not a solution to division, indeed, given indications that development is an “arena of conflict where diverging parties try to establish political security [and] control over resources” (Bähre, 2007:99) some tension is axiomatic, it would dilute the potential for elite capture. Although such a complicated system of community representation could prove difficult for public officials and private agencies/developers to integrate into bureaucratic structures, it would expand the potential for community representivity. Furthermore, where a period of campaigning for services has not occurred, some public intervention to build community capacity before negotiations regarding a proposed development are crucial.

### ***External control and exploitation***

The potential for external control of a development is significant, whether intentional or unwitting. Ranging from corruption amongst those involved in the process (both external agents and internal beneficiaries), to participation fatigue and reliance on external expertise, the likelihood of more powerful public/private officials overwhelming poor marginalised beneficiaries is well known. In fact, because the Westlake development was almost exclusively privately controlled, no CDF was created, with the developers preferring to use pre-existing community groups, presumably aware that although these did not adequately represent the community, reliance on them would speed the process and that by exploiting community divisions, protest against the development would be restricted. Ameliorating the potential for external control again points to the need for community capacity pre-development discussions. It is essential that communities learn how to negotiate with external actors (e.g. government, developers) in order to ensure their needs are not sidelined by ‘experts’ (Baumann et al, 2004:207).

### ***Structural constraints***

The structural constraints of a development project will vary from place to place, but three key themes are likely to affect most projects. Firstly, the rigidity of any national policy being followed, for example the effective undermining of community groups by South Africa’s RDP policy through its emphasis on set outcomes channelled through public officials (i.e. no scope for ‘real’

community discussion). Secondly, the likelihood of conflict between different levels of government, particularly evident in this case where opposing political parties controlled local and national government, but likely to affect many development strategies. Thirdly, the asymmetry between beneficiaries and development professionals, for example socio-economic status, access to information and resources as well as political voice, restricts the potential for 'real' community involvement. Although this is accentuated in the post-apartheid context, it is a common feature throughout the Global South, where projects pit the poor and marginalised against local and global 'experts'. Again, the solution to this is increased community capacity to ensure adequate participation in the development process.

### ***How can community-based capacity be developed?***

Oldfield (2002) identifies two essential components for developing community capacity. Firstly, the establishment of internal strengths, such as a community united by language, history or a common struggle; and secondly, the development of external links, such as access to political and financial power. Two of her examples demonstrate this: in Green Point, internal cohesion and unity were mobilised into community capacity through efforts to establish external links (i.e. municipal interest in their demands for formalisation), while in Delft South, community capacity was a consequence of external support (Legal Aid) with which to fight the state. The failures of the Westlake community in this case to develop either internal strength or external support confirms Oldfield's (2002) conclusions that the capacity of a community determines their ability to challenge the state, impact their future and secure development objectives.

In cases where neither internal strength nor external support exist there is clearly a crucial role for a neutral party (public officials perhaps) in supporting the community towards achieving these goals. Although Westlake was ultimately supported by the municipal social development department, their interventions only began three years after residents moved into their houses. In fact, this support was needed before the development commenced, before the land transfer to private ownership was signed, before the government agreed to finance housing subsidies, and certainly before the developers first approached the community. This represents a major challenge to development agencies, as the logistics involved are significant. However, Baumann et al (2004:207-8) suggest that such an approach could be facilitated by development agencies and officials embracing a complete change in focus, away from the product itself and onto the process involved. This focus on the process rather than delivery per se is required so that communities of the poor ultimately become central to their own development. Baumann et al (2004) argue that the starting point for this new approach is for programmes and officials to consider the everyday realities and practises of the poor, enabling poor communities to strengthen and develop these, rather than changing these practises based on middle-class understandings of everyday life.

Indeed, evidence from Westlake village suggests that community participation in the absence of community capacity is highly problematic, leading to minimal active involvement in the development process, exploitation by those leading the process (in this case private developers), capture by local elites and continued divisions and weak capacity for several years post-development. The logical conclusion is that only those communities that have fought for services and thus developed community organisation and capacity, should be rewarded with services. Obviously this is an impractical and unhelpful line of argument, but it highlights the necessity of some level of community capacity and participation for a development to be successful, thus suggesting a crucial role to be played by public officials in developing this and

responding to the specific context of each development, something not well suited to the bureaucracy of public services.

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